

The United States of America
Before the Federal Communications Commission

In the Matter of

AMENDMENT OF PART 97 OF
COMMISSION'S RULES GOVERNING
THE AMATEUR RADIO SERVICE TO
IMPLEMENT CHANGES TO ARTICLE 25
OF THE INTERNATIONAL RADIO
REGULATIONS ADOPTED AT THE 2003
WORLD RADIOCOMMUNICATION
CONFERENCE

RM-10867

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Comments by Kiernan K. Holliday, WA6BJH

COMES NOW the undersigned Amateur Radio operator and respectfully says unto the Commission:

Conclusions

1. Abolish Morse code testing for *all* license classes.
2. Establish a two-tiered license structure—the General class with privileges consistent with the current General class and an Advanced class with full amateur privileges.
3. All Novice and Technician licensees would immediately receive General class privileges and all Extras would be “downgraded” to Advanced. All current Advanced and Extra class licensees would have full amateur privileges.
4. Keep the question pools public.

Comments

Wayne Green, W2NSD, said in one of his editorials in *73 Magazine* that you couldn't interest the public

in ham radio if you stood on the street corner and passed out licenses.¹ In my experience, I must agree with Mr. Green. Ham radio is of no interest to the vast majority of the population. There is very little that *anyone* can do increase the percentage of hams in the population, beyond that percentage that finds it interesting enough to actually go out and get a license. Except for the small group that finds it interesting, the public finds it boring. I suspect that hobbies “like tennis or philately”² suffer from the same problem.

Regardless of what the Commission chooses to do with the Amateur Radio Service, ham radio will remain one of those boring, arcane hobbies that the public couldn’t care less about. Therefore, discussions about the number of hams in relation to the general population are irrelevant.

The Commission needs to establish a licensing and frequency management structure that:

1. Is simple for the public to deal with,
2. Can be operated with the least effort from the Commission and its staff, and
3. Does not discriminate against people with disabilities.

A Simple Structure

The simplest way to have a simple license structure is to have a simple number of different licenses. Three license classes is a good idea; two would be better. My suggestion is simple: Have two classes of license, a General and an Advanced. The General class of license would have all the privileges that a current Advanced class has and the Advanced would have full privileges.³

The General licensee would need to pass a written test with 25, 30, 40, or 50 simple questions—the

¹ Mr. Green’s rantings were always fascinating, and if nothing else, provided a monthly injection of humor into ham radio. I read this one years ago, but I can’t remember which year.

² Lehrer, Tom; “Smut,” *That Was The Year That Was*, Reprise Records, 1965.

³ By calling the full-privilege license “Advanced” this solves the problem of “giving” people privileges that they didn’t “earn.” Under my proposal, Extras would be downgraded to Advanced and would have full privileges at that license class.

number of questions doesn't make much difference. The test should be simple, on the order of the way the Technician test is now. Certainly the test should include questions about RF safety or other issues regarding high frequency operation. All Novice and Technician licenses would automatically become General class licenses.⁴ When they renewed their licenses they would get a piece of paper with "General Class" printed on it.

The Advanced licensee would need to pass a written test with 25, 30, 40, or 50 questions that aren't quite as simple as the General class test. All Extras would automatically be downgraded to Advanced and get full operating privileges at that license class.⁵ When they renewed their licenses they would get a piece of paper with "Advanced Class" written on it. If they chose, they could keep their old license document and prove that at one time they had actually passed a 20 word per minute Morse code test.⁶

The frequency management for this system would be quite simple. The General class licensee would have access to all ham radio frequencies that a current General class licensee can use. The Advanced class licensee would have full privileges. The Novice ghetto⁷ would, of course, not be necessary.

Power limitations would not be necessary. Technicians can now operate 1,500 watts at VHF—potentially more dangerous than 1,500 watts at HF.

Simple for the Commission

It's difficult for a member of the public to comment on what would be simple for the Commission and its staff. It is apparent, however, that fewer license classes would be better than more license classes. It is apparent that not having a Morse code test would be simpler than having one.

Handicapped Access

⁴ Or, if you prefer, all Generals and Techs would become Novices and receive General-type privileges at that license class.

⁵ Or, see note 3, above.

⁶ Reruns of *Happy Days*, any show.

⁷ Comments by Leonard H. Anderson. I love that.

The word “handicapped” cannot be found in the American Radio Relay League’s petition for rulemaking. This failure to address a significant issue comes even though Scott Neustadter, W4WW, the chairman of the Question Pool Committee of the National Conference of Volunteer Examiner Coordinators reports that he has already “had individuals at testing sessions seek a wavier (sic) to the existing Morse code requirements due to the change in the international treaty.”⁸

It is inconceivable that Mr. Neustadter is the only person in the entire country to deal with reasonable accommodations for handicapped people. When I lived in Juneau, Alaska, and gave tests for the Anchorage Amateur Radio Club VEC, I handled one request for higher speed Morse code waiver. This in a city of thirty thousand people. The difficulties of handicapped people taking the tests must be a common problem and must be well-know to the VECs, including the American Radio Relay League.

It is not surprising, however, that the League continues in its efforts to keep handicapped people off the ham bands. When the Commission allowed medical waivers for the thirteen and twenty word per minute tests, the League announced that it would keep records of the people who had received the waivers to prevent these licensees from administering the higher speed Morse code tests. The League took this action in spite of three important facts:

1. The people who had passed the test with the waivers held the higher class license and by law were entitled to the privileges of that class of license,
2. The law does not allow discrimination against people with disabilities, and
3. When the Commission’s staff gave the license exams, the (unlicensed) office secretaries often administered the tests.⁹

The League’s action at the time caused my blood pressure to rise precipitously. I wrote to the Commission

⁸ Comments by Scott Neustadter.

⁹ Indeed, when I failed the twenty word per minute test at the Commission’s office in San Francisco, I remember the secretary saying, “I don’t know anything about Morse code. I just run the tape recorder.” She also scored the tests.

at the time demanding that the League change its policy or that it be barred from administering examinations. In order to keep my blood pressure under control, I didn't pursue the matter.

It is true that the League recently published in *QST* a construction article for a “suck and blow” Morse code sender¹⁰ for people who can't use their hands. This article is a clear attempt to show that the League “cares” about handicapped access to the ham bands. But the League's actions speak louder than its words.

Several commenters urge that the Commission accept the League's Morse code proposal as a compromise.¹¹ There can be no compromise on rights of access to the ham bands. The Commission must not put barriers in the way of any person who wants to participate in the hobby of ham radio.

Question Pools

There seem to be lots of comments about whether or not the questions and answers for the ham radio exams should be public.¹² I'm not exactly sure why people want to make the tests more difficult. True, back in the good old days¹³ we all read the League publications—that's all there was—and then we trundled off to the Commission offices to take the test, or waited for six months until the Commission staff showed up in a “nearby” city to administer the tests. It is possible that the old system would give us a higher “quality” of ham radio operator, but I doubt it. I was on a volunteer examiner team that gave test in Gustavus¹⁴, Alaska.¹⁵ Seven people took the technician test and only one or two passed. That probably isn't a typical percentage, but if all you have to do is memorize the questions and answers, why do people fail it?¹⁶

¹⁰ *QST*, sometime in the past few months.

¹¹ Indeed, Gordon West wants to help his business by making Extra class licensees pass a 13 word per minute test.

¹² *Way* too many to list.

¹³ *op. cit. Happy Days*.

¹⁴ Accent on the second syllable. The “a” is long.

¹⁵ It was a great flight over from Juneau in a small Piper. I recommend it.

¹⁶ Furthermore, there's little to do in Gustavus except memorize questions and answers.

Memorizing questions and answers is a time-honored system for passing tests in the United States. Almost every professional or graduate school entrance examination has a “quickie” study course. I’ve taken several of them.¹⁷ The problem with non-public exam question pools is that some people end up with the questions and answers and some don’t. Even when the Commission was administering examinations, the questions and answers couldn’t be kept secret.¹⁸ It would be almost impossible for VECs to keep the questions and answers secret. The questions and answers would be available on the Internet or you could buy them outside the test from some guy with a big overcoat.

Conclusions

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Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kiernan K. Holliday". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the last name being particularly prominent.

Kiernan K. Holliday,
WA6BJH

¹⁷ One for the LSAT, one for the bar exam, one for the P.E. test. I managed to pass the first phone without a quickie course.

¹⁸ When I worked in a radio station, one of the announcers took a quickie class to pass the first phone. He took the test in Norfolk and the Commission staff caught him with the answers written on a slide rule. He spent the rest of the day in the FBI office across the hall.